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ABSTRACT

Research has demonstrated that depressed people lack the optimistic bias evidenced by nondepressed persons and that the former may be more realistic in predicting the outcome of future events (depressive realism hypothesis). This study assesses the depressive realism hypothesis by comparing the accuracy of depressed and nondepressed people's self-predictions of a series of life events. One hundred college students (75 females) answered the Beck Depression Inventory and then made self-predictions about a series of future life events. Results indicate that depressed persons made significantly more pessimistic predictions than nondepressed subjects. Depressed persons were more accurate than nondepressed ones for pessimistic judgments while the latter were more accurate on optimistic judgments. No mediating factors such as event controllability and base rate were found for prediction accuracy. One possible explanation for the finding that depressives are more accurate than nondepressed subject in predicting undesirable events is that nondepressed persons may be more apt to avoid undesirable outcomes whereas depressed individuals may not elude these. Included are two tables which summarize the data and a copy of the Life Events Questionnaire. (RJM)

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Self-Predictions and Depressive Realism in Future Life Events

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Abstract

Are nondepressed persons optimistically unrealistic and depressed more realistic in appraising future life events? Depressed and nondepressed subjects made self-predictions about a series of future life events. Results indicated that in the prediction of undesirable events depressed persons were more accurate than nondepressed for pessimistic judgments, and that nondepressed persons were more accurate than depressed for optimistic judgments. No mediating effects for factors such as event controllability and base rate were found for prediction accuracy. These findings are somewhat inconsistent with those of previous research (Dunning & Story, 1991). Explanations and practical implications of these results were presented.

Self-Predictions and Depressive Realism in Future Life Events

Past research has demonstrated that people tend to be unrealistic in making appraisals regarding future events. Particularly, persons' judgments about their futures tend to reflect an optimistic bias in that they believe they are more likely than others to attain desirable outcomes and avoid aversive events (e.g., Shrauger 1982; Weinstein, 1980), regardless of the degree of control they have over the event's outcome (Langer, 1975). However, investigators have discovered that depressed persons are more pessimistic than nondepressed persons in appraising future events (Alloy & Ahrens, 1987; Pyszczynski, Holt, & Greenberg, 1987). These investigations suggest that depressed persons lack the optimistic bias evidenced by nondepressed persons and may also be more realistic in predicting the outcome of future events (depressive realism hypothesis). Although preliminary investigations assessing the validity of this hypothesis have asserted that depressed persons exhibit more realism in judgments about themselves (e.g., Osberg & Shrauger, 1990), more recent research has failed to support this view (Dunning & Story, 1991).

The aim of the present study was to assess the depressive realism hypothesis by comparing the accuracy of depressed and nondepressed people's self-predictions of a series of life events. We also examined some of the conditions which may contribute to greater or lesser realism in persons' self-appraisals. These included the desirability and controllability of events, and whether or not predictions were in accordance with base rates for these events.

Methods

One hundred introductory psychology students (75 females) served as subjects. To assess depression, students were administered the Beck Depression

Inventory (BDI; Beck, 1967) during their class sessions. Subjects were divided into thirds based on the BDI. There were 33 depressed (12 and above), 34 mid-range depressed (7 through 11), and 33 nondepressed (6 and below) subjects accordingly.

To assess self-prediction accuracy, subjects were administered a revision of a measure used previously by Osberg and Shrauger (1986) that consisted of 75 events or behaviors (see Appendix). They were asked to predict the likelihood that an event or behavior would occur or not occur over a one month period using a 4-point scale (from "definitely will not occur" to "definitely will occur"). A month later subjects reported the occurrence or nonoccurrence of each event from which accuracy was then assessed (although the context was designed to disguise the fact that accuracy was being examined).

To assess parameters of differential accuracy, controllability ratings for all 75 events were obtained from the mean judgments of 54 subjects along a 4-point scale (from "totally beyond my control" to "totally under my control"). High and low control items were differentiated by a median split. Also, to examine accuracy of "optimistic" (prediction of positive events to happen or negative events not to happen) and "pessimistic" (prediction of negative events to happen or positive events not to happen) predictions, 61 other raters rated each event as either positive or negative along a 4-point scale (from "very undesirable" to "very desirable") in order to obtain a mean valence rating for each event. From these mean ratings 15 desirable and 15 undesirable events, matched for base rate, were identified and used in the assessment of optimistic and pessimistic judgments.

Results and Discussion

Depressed persons made significantly more pessimistic predictions than nondepressed persons (see Table 1). These differences were primarily evidenced

in the prediction of undesirable events, $F(2,97) = 11.51$, $p < .001$. No significant differences in prediction frequency for desirable events were found. These findings correspond with past investigations which have found depressed persons to be more pessimistic in judging future events (Pyszczynski et al., 1987; Weinstein, 1980), although here these differences may be primarily due to judgments about undesirable events.

In order to assess accuracy for all 75 events, an item was scored a "hit" if it was predicted to occur and did or predicted not to occur and did not. Hits were the main measure of accuracy in the present study. No overall differences in the accuracy of predictions across all 75 items as a function of depression occurred ($F < 1$). However, looking at accuracy for desirable and undesirable events only, an ANOVA (depression x desirability x predicted outcome) showed differences between depressed and nondepressed subjects as a function of the desirability of events and whether they were predicted to occur or not occur (see Table 2). The significant depression x desirability x predicted outcome interaction, $F(2,95) = 4.06$, $p = .02$, indicated that depressed subjects were more accurate than nondepressed in predicting undesirable events to occur, and nondepressed subjects were more accurate than depressed in predicting undesirable events not to occur. In general, depressives tended to be more accurate when they made pessimistic predictions and nondepressed subjects were more accurate when they made optimistic predictions, although these results were most evident in the prediction of undesirable events.

Also examined was whether differences in depressed and nondepressed subjects' accuracy were influenced by either the controllability or the base rate of events. Overall, subjects were significantly more accurate in predicting events which were low rather than high in perceived controllability, $F(1,91) = 8.03$,

$p < .01$. However, no differences in accuracy as a function of both depression and controllability were found. These findings are somewhat counterintuitive, since it might be assumed that people are more accurate in predicting events that are under their control. However, previous investigations have found that controllability is typically unrelated to prediction accuracy (Shrauger & Osberg, 1982).

In examining the role of base rates, we looked at the accuracy of predictions about the outcome that the majority of subjects experienced (with base rate) and the accuracy of predictions about the outcome that the minority of subjects experienced (against base rate). Results indicated that subjects tended to more frequently ($F(1,94) = 357.03$, $p < .001$) and more accurately ($F(1,91) = 70.92$, $p < .001$) predict with the base rate than against it. However, the relative accuracy of depressed and nondepressed subjects was not influenced by the base rate of events. This finding is inconsistent with previous research (Dunning & Story, 1991) which has suggested that depressed persons typically neglect, or predict against, population base rates in making self-appraisals.

These results provide only partial support for the depressive realism hypothesis and are contrary to past investigations which have found depressed persons to be unrealistically optimistic in self-predictions (Dunning & Story, 1991). One possible explanation for the finding that depressives are notably more accurate than nondepressed subjects in predicting undesirable events to occur is that nondepressed persons may be more apt to avoid undesirable outcomes whereas depressed may not. Another possibility is that depressed persons may remember the occurrence of undesirable events more readily than nondepressed persons. Future investigations should specifically examine the mechanisms underlying the accuracy of depressed persons for undesirable events.

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Table 1

Prediction Frequency of Nondepressed and Depressed Subjects as a Function of Event Desirability and Whether Outcome Was Predicted to Occur/Not Occur

Event Desirability Predict Occur/Not Occur	Nondepressed (%)	Mid-Range Depressed (%)	Depressed (%)
Desirable			
Occur	58.6	55.2	54.0
Not Occur	41.4	44.8	46.0
Undesirable			
Occur	46.8	61.5	63.3
Not Occur	53.2	38.5	36.7

Table 2

Accuracy of Nondepressed and Depressed Subjects as a Function of Event Desirability and Whether Outcome Was Predicted to Occur/Not Occur

Event Desirability Predict Occur/Not Occur	Nondepressed (%)	Mid-Range Depressed (%)	Depressed (%)
Desirable			
Occur	84.3	82.5	80.7
Not Occur	78.6	72.3	78.7
Undesirable			
Occur	60.8	74.4	76.2
Not Occur	79.9	75.9	71.6

Student No. _____ Sex: M___ F___

LIFE EVENTS QUESTIONNAIRE

General Instructions: The purpose of our research is to study the impact of various events or experiences on the lives of typical college students. To do this, we are in the process of developing a questionnaire which assesses students' reactions to a variety of events that may occur. Because we are only in the beginning stages of its development, we are asking your help in the further development of this questionnaire whose items follow below. We are asking a number of classes on campus to rate the items on several different dimensions such as how stressful they are, how desirable they are, and the likelihood that each event might happen in the student's own life. To save time, different classes will make different types of ratings. These ratings will be extremely helpful to us in refining the questionnaire to continue our research. We intend to revise the questionnaire based on your collective ratings and we will then return at the end of the semester to have you make some further ratings.

Instructions on Ratings to be Made: One thing we would like to find out about the events included in this life events questionnaire is how likely people feel they are to occur in their own lives. Thus, the kinds of ratings we would like you to make have to do with your perceptions of how likely each event is to happen to you.

Please indicate for each item the likelihood that the event will happen during the NEXT TWO MONTHS by using the scale printed below. We ar asking you to confine your judgements to the next two months because going beyond that becomes somewhat speculative.

PLEASE BE AS ACCURATE AS POSSIBLE in reporting the likelihood of each event. Try to respond to each item even though you may be uncertain of your answer for some. Place the number from the following scale on the dotted line next to each item which corresponds to your judgment:

1 = Will definitely not happen
2 = Will probably not happen
3 = Will probably happen
4 = Will definitely happen

..... 1. Become very upset with or have an argument with a very close friend.

..... 2. Go an entire night without sleep.

..... 3. Enter a hospital or infirmary due to a physical problem.

..... 4. Go into finals with a grade of C or below in at least one course.

..... 5. Introduce yourself to someone you are attracted to.

1 = Will definitely not happen
2 = Will probably not happen
3 = Will probably happen
4 = Will definitely happen

..... 6. Start to play a new sport or physical activity you had not tried before.

..... 7. Offer advice to a friend concerning his or her romantic relationship.

..... 8. Attend a concert for which an admission is charged.

..... 9. Skip a class because you simply don't feel like attending.

..... 10. Agree with someone or say something you don't mean or feel so as not to hurt their feelings.

..... 11. Not have enough money to pay an important bill.

..... 12. At some point feel generally dissatisfied with the way your life is going.

..... 13. Go to a party or social gathering where you felt badly enough about the way you behaved that you worried about it the next day.

..... 14. Make a joke or humorous comment in a group of at least five people which they laughed at.

..... 15. Feel forced to tell someone important too you something negative about themselves which you did not want them to hear.

..... 16. Turn in a paper, project or exam that you felt was the best you had ever done.

..... 17. Change your plans about what you will mainly be doing in this summer (going to school or working, type of work you will be doing).

..... 18. Find yourself refereeing an argument between friends or members of your family.

..... 19. Go to a class unprepared for the discussion because you have not done the required reading.

..... 20. Have some dental work done.

..... 21. Change your hairstyle or type of haircut.

..... 22. Get high on some type of drug besides alcohol.

..... 23. Be in a situation in which your performance is poorer than usual because you are anxious.

Life Events Questionnaire (continued)

1 = Will definitely not happen
2 = Will probably not happen
3 = Will probably happen
4 = Will definitely happen

..... 24. End a romantic relationship.

..... 25. Buy a phonograph record.

..... 26. Have some type of sexual experience you have not had previously.

..... 27. Fall in love.

..... 28. Become intoxicated.

..... 29. Have sexual relations.

..... 30. Go out and party when you should be studying for exams.

..... 31. Eat your main meal of the day alone.

..... 32. Have an argument with one of your parents that was serious enough for you to be concerned about it the following day.

..... 33. Meet someone ne whom you expect to be a close friend for years to come.

..... 34. Eat a type of food you have never had before.

..... 35. Be awakened from your sleep by an unpleasant dream.

..... 36. Go to a movie.

..... 37. Be rejected by a group of people who are important to you.

..... 38. Participate in a group sports activity.

..... 39. Fret or worry on and off for at least three days about something someone says that angers or upsets you.

..... 40. Have a frustrating or unsatisfying sexual experience.

..... 41. Have parents or family members complain to you about some important aspect of your behavior they disapprove of.

..... 42. Learn that someone you thought liked you said something unfavorable about you.

..... 43. Become jealous of someone else's good fortune.

..... 44. Begin to smoke cigarettes or increase your cigarette smoking.

Life Events Questionnaire (continued)

1 = Will definitely not happen
2 = Will probably not happen
3 = Will probably happen
4 = Will definitely happen

..... 45. Have a cold.

..... 46. Cry.

..... 47. Fail a test.

..... 48. Check books out of a library.

..... 49. Join a club.

..... 50. Have an allergic reaction.

..... 51. Receive an honor or award.

..... 52. Forget an appointment.

..... 53. Be treated by a doctor.

..... 54. Break off a close friendship.

..... 55. Tell a lie.

..... 56. Have a broken bone, sprain, muscle pull, or other type of injury.

..... 57. Have a weight loss of 10 pounds or more.

..... 58. Forget to take some medication or vitamin.

..... 59. Go out of the Buffalo area.

..... 60. Get a new job.

..... 61. Give money to charity.

..... 62. Have a digestive problem such as diarrhea, an upset stomach, or an ulcer attack.

..... 63. Borrow money from someone.

..... 64. Exceed posted speed limit by more than 15 mph.

..... 65. Pretend to be ill to avoid some obligation.

..... 66. Feel a sense of elation after some success or accomplishment.

..... 67. Attend a sporting event.

..... 68. View an X-rated movie.

Life Events Questionnaire (continued)

1 = Will definitely not happen
2 = Will probably not happen
3 = Will probably happen
4 = Will definitely happen

..... 69. Have a headache on more than 5 occasions.

..... 70. Accidentally oversleep and miss a class.

..... 71. Buy something and then return it.

..... 72. Experience shortness of breath or chest pain.

..... 73. Have at least one occasion where you felt you should have said "no" to someone and didn't.

..... 74. Throw an object in anger.

..... 75. Become ill after a night of drinking.

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